

VZCZCXRO8765
PP RUEHTRO
DE RUEHAS #1618/01 3100741
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 060741Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4795
INFO RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 8666
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2391
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 1998
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 6850
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1339
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0288
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6084
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3112
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/22/2017

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: HATTAB CASE SHOWS RECONCILIATION STILL AN OPEN
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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Hassan Hattab, notorious for helping create the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998, has become a symbol of the unresolved debate over national reconciliation in Algeria. Although the details of his situation are shrouded in mystery, a disproportionate amount of recent press coverage has placed Hattab in official custody awaiting consideration for amnesty under the 2005 Charter of National Reconciliation. At the same time, no on-the-record statements have been made about Hattab's case by Algerian officials. Despite being far less significant than he once was, Hattab has been exploited as a propaganda tool in part to take the temperature of a public for which reconciliation remains a sensitive and unresolved issue. END SUMMARY.

RECONCILIATION ADRIFT

12. (C) Amnesty is technically no longer an option for the majority of ordinary terrorist holdouts, as the window for applying under the Charter of Peace and National Reconciliation expired in August 2006. However, according to prominent human rights lawyer Miloud Brahimi, the terms of the Charter can still be applied in selected cases at the exclusive discretion of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika himself. As a result of this exception, the Charter continues to "hover in the air," according to Brahimi, with its future and implementation uncertain. Brahimi, the brother of respected Algerian diplomat and UN Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, told us on October 30 that the unresolved fate of the Charter mirrors the fate of national reconciliation itself, which remains "an open wound" for many Algerian families. Brahimi conceded that the government does not know what to do with reconciliation, since the majority of Algerians still do not understand what happened to them during the violence of the 1990s, and remain bewildered by the savagery that tore families and neighbors apart.

HATTAB: MYTH VS REALITY

13. (C) In this context, the much-publicized case of Hassan Hattab has become a symbol and a trial balloon for various approaches to reconciliation. The November 5 front pages of the French-language dailies *Liberte*, *Le Soir d'Algerie* and *Le Jeune Independant* screamed of Hattab's absence from court on

November 4, the date he was expected to present himself for the start of proceedings for terrorist acts against him. According to Rosa Mansouri, who wrote the article for Le Soir d'Algerie, prosecutors pushed the presiding judge to explain Hattab's absence. Mansouri said the judge withdrew for 30 minutes, then returned and pronounced Hattab "en fuite" (at large), which Mansouri explained is simply a technical description of Hattab's absence and did not mean literally that Hattab was free. Mansouri added that after the attempted assassination of President Bouteflika at Batna in September, Bouteflika is sensitive to high-profile terror cases like Hattab and is playing for time to avoid inflaming public opinion either for or against government handling of the case.

14. (C) Algerian press reports assert that Hattab was taken into custody by security forces at a safehouse just east of Algiers on September 22, some two years after amnesty negotiations allegedly began. What remains unclear is whether Hattab had actually surrendered or was captured. Continuing press coverage has highlighted his ineligibility for the amnesty provision of the Charter, given his violent past and the charges of terrorism against him. Brahimi said the government is torn between the spirit of amnesty and redemption that lay behind the concept of the Charter on the one hand, and the tough stance required by the evolving AQIM threat on the other. According to Anis Rahmani, editor in chief of the new Algiers daily newspaper Annahar, the Hassan Hattab of 2007 is clearly not the same man as the one who created the GSPC in 1998. Rahmani, an authority on Islamist and security issues alleged to have close ties to military intelligence, told us on October 30 that Hattab has been out of the terror business for over two years. Rahmani asserted

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that Hattab's surrender has had no effect on AQIM's organization and operations, but Hattab's high profile made him a perfect propaganda tool for the government.

DETAILS OF HATTAB'S ALLEGED DEAL

15. (C) Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni spoke frequently to the press in 2006 about the number of surrendered terrorists as a demonstration that the Charter, passed by national referendum in late 2005, was a success. As of the technical end of the amnesty period in August 2006, the number of surrendered terrorists hovered around 300 -- a figure that was obviously well below expectations, according to Brahimi. During the same period, the Algerian media began reporting that the government was negotiating with Hattab to accept the amnesty provisions of the Charter and use his influence to convince his fellow extremists to follow suit. Because of Hattab's sensitive background (he planned and committed or at least took part in a number of terrorist attacks and massacres), he himself was technically not eligible to take advantage of the amnesty provisions, according to a number of security officers and jurists. However, according to Rahmani, Hattab has been negotiating with the government to benefit from the Charter in exchange for information on other terrorist holdouts. Meanwhile, press coverage on Hattab's status has come in spurts, alternating between a pro-Charter approach and a harder, uncompromising line. According to Brahimi, this is the result of the government using the media to vet different approaches to Hattab and take the temperature of the population. It is perhaps significant that there have been no official statements regarding negotiations with Hattab; all information surrounding this case has been disseminated through the media citing anonymous sources.

THE DEMONIZING OF HATTAB

16. (C) The periodic press leaks on the alleged negotiations with Hattab track a pattern set by the government in recent

years with other terrorist figures. Rahmani told us that the thought of Hattab cooperating with the government presumably weakened his influence with his extremist counterparts and sowed suspicion among them. The hoped-for result -- infighting, mistrust and suspicion within the terrorist ranks -- endangered Hattab's life but also assisted the government in its ongoing struggle to capture/kill AQIM terrorists. AQIM has proven effective at assassinating its own members suspected of collaboration. Pushing Hattab's former colleagues to turn on him could be seen as a welcome secondary goal of the propaganda program.

COMMENT: BALANCING AN OLD CHARTER WITH A NEW THREAT

17. (C) It is difficult to determine whether Hattab gradually lost his influence within the GSPC/AQIM as a result of a successful propaganda campaign or whether he truly had a change of heart and is cooperating with the government against his former terrorist associates. What is clear is that the merger between GSPC and AQIM has complicated the resolution that the Charter of Peace and National Reconciliation was designed to achieve. While the Charter has not become obsolete, its fate is uncertain, as Algerians try to confront a different terror threat while the open wounds of the 1990s civil war and incomplete national reconciliation continue to fester. Many contacts tell us that President Bouteflika himself remains firmly attached to the provisions and intent of the Charter, but that others in the senior leadership have grown less supportive. The case of Hassan Hattab and the media attention it has received suggest that the fate of the Charter, like the psychological status of reconciliation itself, is in limbo, with the government uncertain of how to proceed.
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